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ABSTRACT

A selection of romances from medieval literature can be used successfully in undergraduate literature classes to trace the appearance and relevance of medieval themes, motifs, and characters in works of modern poetry, fiction, and film. New scholarly editions, historiographies, translations, and modernizations give both teachers and students more authentic materials with which to work. For example, in "Tristan and Iseult" students find the tale of a love that survives denunciation, entrapment, and long separations to become a symbol of faithfulness for centuries to come. T. S. Eliot, in "The Waste Land," uses echoes of this poem and of Chretien's "Perceval" to point up the impermanence of relationships and the moral disintegration of twentieth-century life. Other themes can be traced from "Yvain," "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," and "Le Morte Darthur" to "The Wizard of Oz," "Star Wars," "A Book of Common Prayer," and "Monty Python and the Holy Grail." Papers and class discussions have revealed that students can learn to recognize and appreciate the Middle Ages as a time of creativity and wit. (KEH)

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Medieval Romances: Perceval to Monty Python

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The 1990s are a great time to introduce undergraduates to the medieval romances. From a professional point of view, the decade is auspicious, because new scholarly editions, critical studies, and translations and modernizations give both teachers and students more authentic materials with which to work. From the vantage point of student interest, there is an even stronger argument: medieval themes and motifs and characters regularly appear in literary works of the twentieth century. Understanding the significance these characters had centuries ago helps the reader grasp their significance in the contemporary works.

Last spring I taught a course in medieval literature to undergraduates. Among the works we read were three French romances -- Tristan and Iseult and Chretien de Troyes' Yvain and Perceval - - and two English romances - Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and sections of Sir Thomas Malory's Le Morte Darthur. In this paper I would like to point out certain elements in these works and show how they have appeared in well known twentieth-century works.

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I opened the course with Tristan and Iseult, a centuries-old tale of two lovers, tricked by a magic potion and doomed never to be able to reveal their love publicly. Since no complete manuscript of this famous French romance has survived, I chose Joseph Bedier's early twentieth-century reconstruction of the story, available in an inexpensive paperback. I thought Tristan and Iseult would be a good place to start because its accumulation of incidents and rather simple plotting suggest its early medieval origins. Later, I decided I had made a mistake. These students had heard of King Arthur, but not of medieval romances or even of Tristan and Iseult. Despite my introduction, they seemed to perceive the two lovers as two strange people. The next time I teach the course, I may begin with Geoffrey of Monmouth's account of the birth of Arthur and the sword in the stone, then go directly to selected sections of Malory.

At any rate, I wanted students to be aware of Wagner's opera, Tristan und Isolde, and to recognize the theme of undying love that T.S. Eliot introduced into The Waste Land in 1922. In this aim I was more successful. When I brought copies of Eliot's poem to class and students read

Frisch weht der Wind
Der Heimat zu
Mein Irisch Kind,
Wo weilest du?

and "Oed und leer das Meer," they could see how the permanence of the medieval love contrasts with the impermanence, the complete lack of feeling among Eliot's modern men and women.

Jean Frappier, by his critical studies and careful modern French renditions of Chretien de Troyes' romances, did much in the mid-twentieth century to renew interest in Chretien's writing. Currently, the new Garland series of modern English translations of Chretien's romances is winning critical acclaim. So far, three of the romances, Yvain, Lancelot, and Erec and Enide, have appeared. A much less expensive Everyman edition has brought all five of Chretien's extant romances together in one paperback, in a fluent modern English translation by D.D.R. Owen, a French professor at St. Andrews University.

In Yvain, or the Knight with the Lion, generally regarded as Chretien's best work, students read of a noble knight-errant who, aided by a grateful lion, seems to face a long life of wedded bliss at the close of the romance. But it is the lion who holds our attention in a special way, as lions have done in literary matters since the lion that protected Androcles in the Roman amphitheater. In fact, lions appear a number of times in the romances, including such native English romances as Guy of Warwick and Bevis of Hampton, and Malory's Tale of the Sankgreal, in the Perceval episode. At least a century earlier than any of these, however, is Yvain. Probably none of the English authors

had a first-hand acquaintance with Chretien's Yvain, but there may have been some common source.

Because so many leonine characters have appeared over the centuries, we can only say that a particular lion in a later literary work possesses characteristics similar to those of Yvain's faithful companion, not the same as those of Yvain's lion. When I mentioned in class that a lion similar to Yvain's appears in Spenser's Faerie Queene, to guard Una when the Red Cross Knight has been tricked into leaving her, students did not seem anxious to follow up my lead. But when I asked students about lions that they had met in some literary context, someone remembered the Cowardly Lion in L. Frank Baum's The Wizard of Oz. Then another student tentatively suggested Chewbacca in the Star Wars trilogy.

We found it was true that Una's lion, the mis-named Cowardly Lion, and Chewbacca did possess some of the same characteristics as Yvain's lion -- protectiveness, devotion, courageous attacks on the enemy. The Cowardly Lion had another point in common with Yvain's lion: he was willing to go hunting and to slay a deer for dinner. The Tin Woodman objected, however, in the twentieth century, and Dorothy ate nuts and fruit. Yvain, on the other hand, had enjoyed the venison steak, cut "from the loin."

In Star Wars, students may point out, the lion-protector has to adjust to space technology. He can no longer attack and maul a wicked goblin-knight, because the Evil Empire has light sabers and walking tanks and some kind of air boats that speed like arrows through the forest. Protection from Chewbacca, the wookie-mechanic, may come as he performs marvelous feats with Han Solo's spacecraft, thus keeping Han and the ship safe from Darth Vader's attacks.

For Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, a perennial favorite among English teachers, the Tolkien -- Gordon -- Davis text is fine for graduate classes. I was looking for something simpler, however, and I chose Marie Borroff's translation.

In Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Gawain is welcomed to Bertilak's castle, is given the courtesy and hospitality due a guest, and is welcomed egregiously but elegantly by the host's wife. All, he learns, have been part of a test devised by Morgan le Fay, the sorceress. Joan Didion, in her novel, A Book of Common Prayer, leads her main character, Charlotte Douglas, into the Deep South, once known for its gracious hospitality. In one segment, the host for the evening is Morgan Fayard. Fayard, unlike Morgan le Fay, from whom his name is derived, cannot control himself or his household, and he becomes an instrument to reveal the tawdriness of twentieth-century American life.

A student who had already read a Grail romance pointed out that Charlotte's large emerald ring suggests the Grail stone. Someone else thought the ring might have a symbolism closer to that of the green jasper ring that the dying Tristan sends to summon Iseult. If so, whom was the ring to call back to Charlotte? Her daughter Marin? Someone else pointed out that the ring might signal to the reader, even early in Didion's novel, that Marin will not return, will not recognize her mother until Charlotte, like Tristan, is dead. Or, perhaps, in a typical modern reversal of an old literary expectation, Marin will not return at all.

Arthurian studies received a great impetus in 1934, with the discovery of the Winchester Manuscript of Sir Thomas Malory's Le Morte Darthur and Eugene Vinaver's subsequent editing of it. Larry Benson, in his own book, Malory's Morte Darthur, wrote in 1976 that "anyone who writes on Malory owes a special debt to Eugene Vinaver, whose studies and editions of Malory have made all our later work possible."

I planned at first to use the one-volume Vinaver edition in my class, but thinking about the one or two non-native speakers of English who might enroll for the course, I chose R.M. Lumiansky's recent modernization, Le Morte Darthur. I am sure an ardent medievalist or an English major would prefer the fifteenth-century forms and idioms and spellings, but the future

accountant and lawyer and sociologist did not seem to mind much.

During the course, we read various sections, or books, as Vinaver calls them, from Malory. I tried to skip the highly repetitive parts, like most of Tristram of Lyonesse. Since the Grail legends still have significance today, I was anxious to have students see how the story had grown from the Middle Ages to the present day.

The earliest extant version of the Grail legend dates back to about 1180, to Chretien de Troyes' Perceval. The Grail story underwent major changes in succeeding centuries, especially as it became part of the French Vulgate Cycle. It was this French prose version that Sir Thomas Malory translated and edited liberally for his "Tale of the Sankgreal," and it is from Malory's account that the movie Monty Python and the Holy Grail seems to draw most of its right to claim any relationship to the Grail legends.

Students enjoyed Chretien's Perceval. It was the second romance by Chretien that they read, and they were beginning to enjoy the tantalizing ambiguities, the relatively swift movement of narrative. But from our experience earlier in the course with Malory's "Tale of King Arthur," I knew that Malory's "Tale of Sankgreal" would be a stumbling block for the students. Therefore, I assigned to each student a section of Malory's Grail

romance, adding parts from the Lancelot and Elaine episode in order to make the assignments come out even.

As the different students contributed to the discussion of Malory's "Sankgreal," they began to see how much the Grail story had changed since Chretien's day. Perceval had matured, Galahad had been born and had grown to knighthood, and a number of recluses and mysterious ships had come upon the scene. A relatively straightforward account had taken on a labyrinthine quality.

When Terry Gilliam and Terry Jones looked for material for their Holy Grail spoof, they were careful not to delve too deeply into Malory's narrative. In Monty Python, King Arthur himself, not Perceval or Galahad or Bors, leads the quest, probably because no other knight has sufficient name recognition in the twentieth century. Arthur is earnest but somewhat simple and ineffectual. He and his fellow knights do not achieve great spiritual goals. In fact, they do not even have horses to ride, but canter on foot, as if they were posting along on powerful war horses. When it seems that at last King Arthur and his knight-companions will reach the Grail Castle, the quest comes to an inglorious end.

Along the way Arthur and his knights have failed to save a young woman charged as a witch, they have fumbled around with riddles, and they have not been able to outwit a screechy Norman invader who holds a British castle. They have reached the Castle of Maidens, but it is unlike any of its predecessors in Yvain or Perceval or Malory's "Tale of the Sankgreal." In fact, in the movie, it is necessary to rescue the "pure" Galahad from the aggressively flirtatious maidens.

No one has found the Grail. The film seems to say, "The Middle Ages were odd, dull, addled - don't mourn them."

The students - and I - laughed. I felt a little disappointed, but then I remembered class discussions and student papers on medieval women, Celtic materials in the romances, courtly love doctrine in Yvain, and so on. I convinced myself - I think! - that the students recognized the Middle Ages as a time of some creativity and wit.